

Today is the fourth and final Sunday of Advent, the season when we prepare for the coming of the Christ, both at Christmas and in the second coming. Over the past three Sundays we have heard from the prophets – those who are given God’s visions. But today prophecy comes home. Specifically it comes to the doorstep of the home of Elizabeth and Zechariah in an unnamed town of Judah. There, Elizabeth greets Mary. There, the yet unborn John greets the yet unborn Jesus.

This is a wonderful picture of two important women – the mothers of the two prophets, John the Baptizer and Jesus the Christ.

The four gospels are quite different in their treatment of Jesus’ life prior to his ministry. Mark, the shortest and earliest basically ignores it. John, the latest and the most mystical, places Jesus immediately into the archetypal and mystical world with those booming words we will hear next Sunday, “In the beginning was the Word.” In contrast, Luke and Matthew provide us with stories of Jesus’ nativity. It is Luke who tells us about the shepherds and the angels, Matthew who supplies the three magi. Biblical scholars, Borg and Crossan, have suggested that the way each gospel writer introduces Jesus provides us with clues of their perspective on his life and teaching.

So we can look at the accounts Luke gives, and see in them the particular aspects of Jesus life that he will be emphasizing in his gospel. Luke reminds us again and again that Jesus was concerned about the common people, the poor, and the women.

So here in Luke’s gospel we have this beautiful cameo of these two women. We don’t know exactly how they were related but we do know that Elizabeth was “well along in years.” In contrast Mary was a young woman, probably still a teenager. Given the social disaster of a pregnancy before marriage, it was just as well that Mary left home for a while. I’m guessing that the neighbors wouldn’t buy the virgin birth story.

And who better for Mary to spend time with when she had to adjust to the amazing and improbable fact that she was pregnant, and that this was

no ordinary child, than with an older woman who was herself experiencing her first pregnancy?

Their reunion is so joyful that Mary breaks into song. This is no happy dance ditty but a major statement of her faith. It reminds us of the prophet Miriam who sang and danced after the Hebrew people had crossed the Red Sea, and of Hannah who sang when she took her son Samuel to the temple to dedicate him to God (1 Samuel 2:10). Hannah, like Elizabeth, had been unable to have children and when God answered her prayer and Samuel was born and grew into a healthy child she composed a song which is very similar to some of the psalms, especially Psalm 113.

Mary's song belongs in this great tradition of songs of praise. And she belongs in the great tradition of women of God, most of whom are silenced or unnamed in the Scriptures. But here it is the men who are silenced. Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, has literally been silenced. He was struck dumb by the announcement that she was pregnant. Joseph is mentioned as the man to whom Mary was betrothed, but otherwise he doesn't enter this account until the journey to Bethlehem.

This is a great reversal. Usually it is the men whose lives and conversations are recorded, but this is time for the women, just the women. The reversal echoes those in Mary's song: "He has brought down rulers... but has lifted up the humble" and "He has filled the hungry... and sent the rich away empty." This is the great reversal that Luke emphasizes. In the reign of God everything is topsy-turvy. In the reign of God women get to be heroes, the homeless get homes while the rich are evicted, the hungry are fed and the well-fed have empty plates.

The Palestine of Mary and Elizabeth was a very unequal society where the gap between rich and poor was enormous, much like it is in our society today. Even though unemployment is low, we are seeing a rise in homelessness in this county because there simply are not enough the homes to go around and those that are available to rent are far too expensive for the average working person to afford. I can't imagine a great reversal happening here, where the wealthy are turned out of their

big mansions and the poor get to move in. But I can imagine the people of God saying “enough is enough” and forcing local and national government to take the housing crisis seriously. I can imagine the people of God demanding higher density housing in San Luis Obispo County so that individual families don’t have several acres to enjoy while their neighbors sleep in their cars. I can imagine us making housing the big election issue for the county supervisors next fall.

The great social reversal will only be truly achieved when the people of God take seriously their prophetic call to work for social justice. That is our job until the final day when all will be revealed and all our questions answered and in the reign of Christ all will be fair and peaceful. Until then, we have much to do.

But Mary’s song is much more than a social critique. It is a song of praise to God, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Mary has moved beyond a practice of gratitude to a direct connection with God in which she addresses the divine intimately and with joy. This is not a simple thank you God for blessing me, this is a prayer of highest praise.

Someone once said to me, “I don’t understand why we need to praise God. Surely he doesn’t constantly need a pat on the back and to be told he’s doing a good job.”

That’s not the kind of praise we are talking about. When we love someone deeply then sometimes we look at them and our hearts are filled with joy and connection and love and we say “I love you” or “You’re amazing” or “You’re so cute” or whatever it is that expresses however minutely, that tremendous sense of warmth, affection and gratitude. That is the kind of praise that we talk about with God. Yes we praise God for the manifestations we see of divine love. Mary says, “for the Mighty One has done great things for me” but that’s not really why she’s praising God. She’s praising God because her heart is full.

It was a good day in that hill town in Judah as the two women celebrated their pregnancies. Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the image of a

barren woman being able to conceive is a powerful representation of God's love and God's faithfulness. That which was sorrow-filled has been made joyous. Elizabeth has conceived. And amazingly, the young unwed woman has also conceived. God the Creator has brought something out of nothing.

There was much reason to praise God.

We too have days like that. Days when there is much to praise God for. But we also have the other days. The days when life's problems seem overwhelming. The days when everything seems dull and our hearts are heavy.

But God has not changed. God is still the same. There are just as many reasons to praise God on dark days as on bright days. Perhaps even more. And the primary reason to praise God is that we were created to do just that. We were created to be in that close intimate relationship with the divine which makes our hearts open with joyous love and wonder in God's presence.

This is when our discipline of joy comes in. This is when Paul's encouragement to "Rejoice at all times" comes into play. We fake it till we make it. We sing the hymns of praise until we look up and our hearts open and suddenly the connection is made once again. We can praise even through our tears. But we will not be able to praise in the dark times if we have not learned to praise during the good times.

I would suggest that in addition to a practice of daily noting the things for which you are grateful and thanking God for them, that you learn a verse or two of a hymn that really speaks to your heart, and make a practice of singing it every morning. We were give voices to praise God and even if you can't hold a tune, your praise is as valid and important to God as the sweetest chorister.

Let us each make a daily practice of praising and glorifying God with Mary: "'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.'